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ABSTRACT

Listening is an integral element of the curricular goals of all modern foreign language classrooms because it is: (1) a motivator and facilitator, (2) a reliable predictor of language learning success, and (3) a skill contributing to success in many endeavors in life. A variety of classroom teaching and testing procedures based on listening skills is available, including drawing according to spoken instructions, songs using cloze procedure, and determining the appropriateness or inappropriateness of a statement. A system that apportions points to each course element allows flexibility in determining the final course grade. For example, a separate listening score could be used, listening could be graded as a subscore of a test, or a separate allotment of points for a specific listening-related task could be provided. By assigning a specific portion of the course's entire value to the listening skill in this way, one makes tangible and important what may have seemed an intangible element. Some examples of classroom listening activities are included. (MSE)

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Listening Ability: Check It or Wreck It

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One need not delve very far into recently proposed teaching approaches such as Total Physical Response (Asher, 1) and Natural Approach (Krashen and Terrell, 3) to discover that, in each case, listening is an absolute essential. Further, even procedures that are not influenced by recently suggested methods and approaches emphasize listening as vitally important to success in language learning. One might expect that an element of such importance would be carefully evaluated whenever it may appear, but such is not the case. Listening is an active skill that accomplishes its communicative purpose differently from the other skills. Some teachers give verbal recognition to the importance of listening but fail to account for it in evaluating student performance. Teachers can collect written compositions for evaluation, can record and evaluate speech, and can maintain a count of things read; but it is more difficult to make a tangible record of accomplishments in listening. Less easily counted skills sometimes escape attention and are treated as if they were less meaningful than they truly are.

This situation might be acceptable were it not for one special characteristic of adolescent language learners. Invariably, items that do not affect grading are ignored in favor of those that do. The problem faced in a great many classrooms is that listening comprehension is recognized as essential by teachers and ignored by students to the detriment of their language development.

What is listening ability? Why is it important? What kinds of activities can be employed in teaching and testing listening comprehension? Most important, how might listening comprehension become part of a student's final grade without giving the impression that the teacher is grading a meaningless intangible? These questions are explored in this

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paper. First, teaching and testing procedures will be briefly outlined. Then, a specific suggestion will be given for including the teaching and testing of listening comprehension in the student's grade.

What Is Listening?

Listening is a mental process made up of four essential elements: hearing, decoding, comprehension, and responding. Language teachers are concerned with all four to some extent, although they are more aware of their work with the last three. While language teachers have no control over a student's physical capacity to hear, they must provide a setting that gives students every possible opportunity to hear. Attempting to select classrooms with better acoustics, moving around the classroom when appropriate, seating those who have difficulty hearing so that they may hear to the best of their abilities, and being sure that recorders, radios, etc. are tuned to avoid distortion are a few of the provisions that most teachers make to assure hearing without giving these provisions much thought. Sometimes, however, they must be reported as conscious steps when teachers are asked what they are doing to assist in mainstreaming the hearing impaired.

Decoding is the process of distinguishing one part of a message from another. Teachers are concerned with decoding (sometimes called interpreting), for example, when they deal with sound discrimination (Did I say *baja* or *paja*?).

Comprehension is a multiple-step evaluative stage at which the decoded message is weighed so that the listener may decide how to use the message and how to respond to it. The product of the comprehension process is meaning—understanding what has been said just after it has been said.

Response is the final stage. The listener responds to indicate reception and processing of the message. Response need not be verbal. A nod will do. In language classes, we often ask students for a particular response. Asher (1) is only one of those who point out that asking for a complex verbal response at an inappropriate time will impede students' progress.

Why Is Listening Important?

There are at least three reasons for including listening in the curricular goals of all modern foreign language classrooms. First, listening experience serves as a motivator and facilitator. Students given a chance to listen without being immediately forced to speak will eventually develop a desire to speak (Asher, 1). This is as true of classrooms oriented toward language acquisition that require such prespeaking experiences as it is of more commonly encountered language classrooms that are oriented toward language learning (Krashen, 3).

Second, listening ability (or at least sound discrimination) has been shown to be a reliable predictor of success in language learning (Pimsleur, 4, p. 180). Further, while there may be no empirical evidence that the tendency to "be musical" (to "always have a melody running through one's head"), correlates with language learning aptitude, observant classroom teachers of foreign languages will note that many of their best students have such a musical tendency whether they play an instrument or not. Other listening skills that similarly seem to correlate with language learning ability include strong imitative ability and an empathic nature that quickly involves students with peers as unofficial counselors. Third, language teachers must remember (and most do) that their responsibilities are as much to their students as they are to their fields of study. ("I teach French but, primarily, I teach kids," said one understanding colleague.) That being the case, teachers must be aware that the kind of listening training done in first language elementary school classes and in foreign language classrooms at all levels may have an effect that extends far beyond subsequent success in language learning to general success in life. Steil, Summerfield, and deMare (5) interviewed chief executives of major American corporations to find that many believe that the listening ability they first developed as children has been critically important to their later success. No one suggests that language teachers promise their prospective students the job of chief executive officer of a major corporation as a result of studying a foreign language. Nonetheless, the listening work done in a language classroom contributes to the development of a skill used by successful leaders in all walks of life. Knowing this can provide teachers with one more reason to study foreign languages.

Listening is a valuable tool in foreign language teaching. Inclusion

of listening in the foreign language curriculum contributes to learning/acquisition and, perhaps even more important, has the potential for making significant contributions to the lifelong success of our students.

Teaching and Testing Listening: Sample Techniques

The literature of foreign language education is replete with extensive descriptions of teaching and testing procedures that are based on listening skills. A few techniques are provided herewith for the purpose of forming a behavioral definition that will enable the reader to visualize the kinds of teaching and testing of the listening skill proposed.

Teaching Procedures

Town Map (Harnishfeger, 2)

1. Draw a town map. Copy it for each student and include such features as a parking lot, several streets, a school, a town plaza, a courthouse, etc.
2. Students are told in the target language that they are to draw a line from place to place as orally instructed.
3. Later, students are asked to compare the lines they have drawn with one on an overhead projection.
4. Variation: Give directions to a specific place on the map without mentioning its name. Students need to identify the place by combining marks on the map with oral instructions.

Draw a Monster

1. Ask students to draw a monster in accord with specific oral instructions.
2. Instructions in the target language may include such things as "it has three legs and twelve eyes," etc.

CLOZE Song

1. Give students copies of the words to a song that is played on tape. In making student copies, leave some words out.
2. Play the tape and ask students to fill in the missing words.
3. The exercise can be varied in difficulty by changing the words omitted.

Testing Procedures

The best key to a valid testing program, of course, is the old saying, "teach what you test and test what you teach." Thus, the teaching devices themselves make some of the best tests there are. The examples for testing listed here differ, nonetheless, from those suggested for teaching to provide variety in both teaching and testing, since an idea for one can be converted to a procedure for the other. The following examples are from Valette (6):

1. **Appropriate-Inappropriate.** On hearing a brief dialogue in the target language, students are to determine whether the last utterance is appropriate or inappropriate.
   Example: Do you like to play tennis?
   Of course, my mother likes ice cream.
   Answer: Inappropriate
2. **True-False.** Students are to listen to statements and mark them true or false.
   Example: Stop signs are red.
   Answer: True

Listening and Grades

Given quantities of data about students' listening ability (the results of testing after teaching), how can the teacher specifically account for listening as a part of final grades? One viable plan is grading with a point system. This kind of system assigns an arbitrary value to the entire course. Depending on local systems, that value may be 1000, 100, or even 10 if one does not object to an occasional decimal. Each aspect of the course to be evaluated receives some portion of the arbitrary value. If the teacher determines that a final exam, for example, is worth 20 percent of the grade, 200 points of 1000 must be assigned to that test.

The flexibility allowed by a point system can provide any number of other variances from a more rigid format. One variance would allow teachers to include a separate listening score. It might be a subscore of a midterm or a final. It might also be a separate allotment of points for an activity such as listening to radio programs and making a "listening diary" of the occasional cognate a beginning student might be able to comprehend.

Here is an example of how a distribution of 1000 points might be made:

Listening	100
Homework	50
Notebook	50
Attendance	100
Regular Quizzes	200
Midterm	200
Final Exam	300
	1000

The point system can be adjusted in a host of ways to accommodate anything the teacher wishes to evaluate. Points can be allowed for a cultural project, a formal paper, or, as is recommended, additional forms of listening practice. By assigning a specific portion of the course's entire value to the listening skill, one makes what students may have considered intangible and unimportant quite tangible and important.

Listening is a fragile entity. If it does not receive specific attention in the evaluation of learning, it will cease to be valued by students, parents, and even teachers themselves. Yet, as indicated above, listening is a vitally important skill. Language teachers should strive to teach listening so that students may succeed both as language learners and, later, as effective communicators who are likely to be society's leaders. This, then, is the message about listening conveyed here: check it or wreck it.

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